

White House mutes criticism of Soviet action in Lithuania

WASHINGTON (AP) — The White House abruptly toned down its criticism of Soviet actions against Lithuania on Tuesday but still reminded Moscow that a severe crackdown could damage superpower relations.

"We do not want to inflame the situation," said White House press secretary Marlin Fitzwater, declining to criticize the Kremlin for seizing at least 23 army deserters from two hospitals in Lithuania in a bloody show of force.

"We simply don't feel that inflammatory language is helpful," Fitzwater said.

While toning down its public

rhetoric, the administration was privately warning Moscow against taking a tough stand, officials said.

"We are letting them know that if they really crack down, we will react, and not just the administration. Congress could take steps and we might not be able to control the reaction," said one administration source.

Two sources, speaking on condition of anonymity, said possible U.S. responses might be to postpone a superpower summit scheduled for June or to delay treaties on nuclear, chemical and conventional arms that both sides want to sign this

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year.

However, one source said, "We don't want to do something that would punish us as much as the Russians." A likely first step would be suspension of trade talks designed to give Moscow most favored nation status in commerce with the United States.

Asked if Soviet President Mikhail S. Gorbachev had violated his pledge against using force in Lithuania, Fitzwater replied, "We simply are not going to try to give definition to words like 'force' and 'intimidation.'"

The restrained U.S. reaction was a sudden change in tone after repeated expressions of concern by President Bush and others about escalating pressure against Lithuania, which defied Moscow and declared its independence March 11.

With the planned summit and prospect of arms agreements, both Bush and Gorbachev have a huge stake in keeping U.S.-Soviet relations on an even keel.